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ABSTRACT

In the course "Designs for English," high school students, working individually and in small groups, practice basic English skills as they explore universal themes. The course is built around 15 units that deal with a wide range of topics, including conflict resolution, communication, values, identity, and love. This paper describes how the course was developed by a team of three teachers, tells how it is organized, and discusses the way in which the course units help students to attain the seven course objectives: learning more about themselves, broadening their understanding of people and relationships, examining abstract concepts in an attempt to develop philosophies of life, examining their own values and those of others, gaining a sense of responsibility, developing tools to deal with the world more effectively, and learning the value of becoming lifelong readers. (GW)

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INDIVIDUALIZED READING AND GROUP INTERACTION: LEARNING FOR A LIFETIME

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By

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The challenge that faces educators today is enormous if not overwhelming. With new information emerging constantly, and with the ever-increasing sophistication of teenagers, English teachers, in particular, are in a quandry about how to help students acquire knowledge, skills, values, and appreciations that they will need to live meaningful lives in the present and make creative adjustments in the future.

In 1972 Cynthia Blankenship, Barbara Stanford, and I faced this challenge in a new Fairview High School in Boulder, Colorado. And along with this challenge, we had a particular problem to overcome; we were all three scheduled to teach three different courses in a large open space. Cindy was scheduled to teach Man in Conflict, Barbara was scheduled to teach Individualized Reading, and I was scheduled to teach Intermediate Composition. When we thought of the upcoming semester, we were horrified about the possibility of confusion and clatter that would ensue if we tried to teach our three classes as if they were

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in enclosed classrooms. To solve our dilemna, Cindy, Barbara and I decided to team teach our seventy-five students, using a curriculum that would make optimum use of the large open space but would also help students gain more of the knowledge and understanding necessary for their lives outside of the classroom. The resulting course was an organized, systematic approach that helped students to think about universal themes while they practiced the skills that would be necessary for their everyday lives. The course is now called Designs for English.

We were lucky in our endeavor in that we had a fine group of students with which to work. Our English program was ungraded so that our students ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen, and our classes were heterogeneous so that our students had a wide range of interests and abilities. In the same class we could have a top artist and mathematician as well as someone who needed remedial help in reading and writing.

Before we could even begin to organize Designs for English, we had to write overall objectives. After much discussion and debate, we wrote the following seven objectives as overall guidelines for our course:

(1) The student will learn more about himself.

(2) The student will broaden his understanding of people and his relationships with them.

(3) The student will examine abstract concepts in an attempt to understand life as if affects him.

(4) The student will examine the values of himself and others in an attempt to clarify his own values.

(5) The student will gain a sense of responsibility.

(6) The student will develop tools to deal with the world more effectively.

(7) The student will see the value of becoming a lifetime reader.

After establishing these overall objectives, we went to work. Designs for English took six months to develop and five years to perfect. That first semester, we worked lunch hours, after school, and every other spare moment we could find.

We began by preparing several units based on themes of concern to adolescents; and we ended up by preparing fifteen units that varied not only in difficulty, but in the subject matter and the approaches used in them. The list of our units includes the following: Interaction; Identity; Woman and Man; Conflict Resolution; Death; Communication; Generations; The Occult; Values; Evil; Popular Mucic; Loneliness; and Love. These units were structured to explore almost every aspect of each particular theme; they contained suggested booklists, a series of assignments, plans for each day's classroom activities, and evaluation procedures for the assignments and activities.

In the beginning of the semester, we offered six units to our seventy-five students. Each student was to choose the unit that interested him most, pick up a copy of that unit, and begin work on his reading and assignments. Students would work on their units in groups of from six to twelve students for three weeks, and then they would choose new units with new groups.

Each teacher was responsible for two groups; therefore, teachers would not be present in every group at all times. The teachers generally circulated between their two groups, answering questions or facilitating the groups' progress when necessary. Teachers also had the reponsibility of evaluating the projects and assignments in their groups. If a particular lesson called for a

teacher evaluation, a teacher might sit with one group for an entire period.

Our students were thrilled with the new structure, and so were we. Most students finished the semester with an impressive record, having read between six and ten books, written twelve to twenty papers and completed thirty to fifty shorter assignments. But more than that, their participation in our new curriculum was helping them to achieve knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that would last a lifetime. As the days passed, we could observe the progress students had made in achieving the lifetime objectives we had set for them.

OBJECTIVE 1: THE STUDENT WILL LEARN MORE ABOUT HIMSELF

Our first objective focused on self-knowledge and understanding. Since Cindy Blankenship, Barbara Stanford, and I felt that self-knowledge is one of the most important factors in adult relationships, we devoted an entire unit to the theme of Identity. One of the activities in this unit asked students to represent their identities in collages. After making the collages from old snapshots, theater tickets, or other mementos, students attempted to explain their ideas and personalities to others who viewed these collages. In the next activity for the Identity unit, our students interviewed group members about their heritages and backgrounds. Then they used the information gained from the interviews to write interesting and colorful autobiographies. Finally, the students

studied the effects of culture and environment on identity. At first, students responded to this unit with shyness, but their confidence grew with the new self-knowledge they acquired. They soon became aware of strengths within the group as they began to understand themselves better.

In addition to this unit on Identity, the use of role-playing throughout the units helped our students to understand themselves better. Before our students studied our unit on Death, many had definite views on euthanasia. Their views changed, however, as they assumed the roles of a soldier in Vietnam or a penniless old man about to die. They found it was easy to make a decision about life and death in the abstract, but it was harder to do so when faced with the situation in reality.

Not only specific activities, but participation in student-led discussions helped many students to gain a new self-awareness. Some shy students were really amazed that they were natural leaders while others were surprised that group members considered them overbearing.

OBJECTIVE 2: THE STUDENT WILL BROADEN HIS UNDERSTANDING OF PEOPLE AND HIS RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEM.

Just as students need to gain a sense of self-awareness in order to function more effectively in their communities, they need knowledge of others in order to deal more effectively with life's problems. Designs for English

helps students to gain this understanding in three main ways: through the study

of people in the media, through the study of fictional characters, and through their own group interaction.

In our media study, we tried to encourage students to analyze people and events in relationship to themselves. In order to define and better understand the causes of evil in modern society, students clipped examples of evil from the newspaper after sharing these articles with classmates, they discussed the possible part that selfishness, depression, disease, or desparation could have played as causes of the evil. Students participated in this assignment seriously and thoughtfully. Some said they gained a deeper appreciation of the complexity of evil than they would have if they had merely read or heard about it.

A second method that helped students to understand others better was the use of an indepth analysis of characters in literature. Discussions of evil and all of its aspects, along with student-teacher conferences helped students to analyze and write vivid descriptions of the characters found in their books. The cold brutality of the killers of In Cold Blood is delineated carefully in one essay while the heartless scheming of Abigail of The Crucible is told in another.

Finally group interaction is one way that students begin to know and understand others better. During the course of the semester, our students studied the skills involved in active listening, working together, and discussion. Students also debated issues, conducted

surveys, and presented results of their research. They had to adjust to the leadership of many people in their various groups. In the process of working in several student-centered groups, our students came in contact with many people who had opinions and conclusions different than their own. As a result of this group intereaction, students became more courteous, tolerant and flexible in group situations, and they became more confident and open when expressing their views to others.

OBJECTIVE 3: THE STUDENT WILL EXAMINE ABSTRACT CONCEPTS IN AN ATTEMPT TO UNDERSTAND LIFE AS IT AFFECTS HIM

Life is filled with unexplainable events, but many curriculums fail to examine any abstract concepts or ideas in depth. Cindy Blankenship, Barbara Stanford, and I felt that it was important for our students to look at life in the abstract in an attempt to form philosophies of life and make their lives more meaningful. Love, evil, and death are forces that affect everyone, but many people can only define these words in general terms and understand little about them. To help our students be more aware of the intricacies involved in love, evil, and death, we structured a unit around each of them, using assignments in prose and poetry. We also asked students to use their creative imaginations in dealing with these abstractions.

In our prose assignments, we asked students to relate all previous discussions and activities in the unit to an abstract concept as portrayed in a novel. In the unit on

Evil, the assignment was to write a composition on the evil found in their novels and the social conditions that caused it. We received some unusual compositions on the atrocities in books of Hiroshima and the insanities of Johnny Got His Gun.

Besides being better able to deal with the abstract, students gained more insight into life through the study of poetry. In almost every unit, we asked students to read poetry as required reading. In Love, in particular, our students came to grasp the abstract concept of Romantic Love. When most students entered our classroom, they seemed to have a standard idea about the meaning of Romantic Love. They were surprised, then, to read some old-fashioned poetry and find out that the concept of Romantic Love had changed through the centuries. Some of the students even began to feel that perhaps Romantic Love wasn't as important as they had thought.

Besides the use of literature, Cindy Blankenship, Barbara Stanford, and I felt that students might associate more meaning to abstractions by participation in creative activities of their own. To better understand the effects and influence of evil in Society, students were to construct a "perfect" society. Heated debates arose regarding the education, work, protection, and shelter in such a society. Some students even came to the conclusion that evil is necessary to bring out the good in society. Some of the outcomes of this assignment were imaginative but

workable; some were fantastic, but students agreed that just working on the assignment gave them a deeper perspective into the influence of evil.

Another assignment involving the abstract that called for student creativity was the first assignment in the unit, Death. For this assignment, students were to draw the relationship of life to death. As can be imagined, this unusual request tended to baffle students until they started to brainstorm on the assignment in their group. Soon they began to relay and verbalize their thoughts, until finally they could commit their ideas to paper.

OBJECTIVE 4: THE STUDENT WILL STUDY THE VALUES OF HIMSELF AND OTHERS IN AN ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY HIS OWN VALUES

In the course of the semester, students studied not only abstract ideas, they also studied the values of themselves and others. Student presentations, games, creative dramatics, and book reports were the vehicles through which students gained new insights into their values.

In the opening unit on Love, each student presented his own ideas of love. The presentation could be in the form of a poem, picture, or recording. Since most of our students were brought up with relatively the same cultural values, it was amazing how the students' ideas varied. One person brought in a poem that expressed true Romantic Love while another brought in a popular record in which true Romantic Love was totally obliterated. Another person even brought in her scrapbook on her family camping trips.

In the interchange, people truly began to understand one another's values better as they broadened their own understanding of love.

Another means in which students became aware of the values of others was through games. In the unit, Evil, the students were asked if they would push a button to kill one person in the world that they didn't know if that act would rid the world of all evil. The purpose of this game was to help students clarify their views as to whether or not the end justifies the means. The response to this question was lively. One student remained firm in his position that he would just as soon kill an unknown person, because he didn't know the man anyway and it wouldn't affect him in any way if a stranger died. Other students used all the moral arguments they could muster to dislodge him from his position. The argument was heated and intense, and in the process, these students became more aware of their own values and those of their classmates.

Creative dramatics was also an important method that helped students become more aware of their values. In the unit Evil, the students created a melodrama in order to understand the unreliability of seeing the world in terms of black and white. Students enthusiastically created an evil villain and a perfect hero; but once created, these characters provided such a contrast to people in real life that students began to change their perceptions of people

and their actions. They realized that no one person could be as totally evil or as totally good as the characters they created.

The study of literature also inspired students to become more knowledgeable about the values of themselves and others. In the unit on Love, students not only examined their own views on love, but they discussed love in a historic context. In reporting on their books, students discussed the customs, attitudes, and values involving love that were presented in their reading. What a contrast they found between the love as portrayed in Wuthering Heights and love as portrayed in Phoebe.

OBJECTIVE 5: THE STUDENT WILL GAIN A SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR HIMSELF AND OTHERS

In addition to the more abstract goals, students gained practical goals from studying our curriculum. Throughout the semester, they gained a heightened sense of responsibility. In our curriculum, we tried to guide students to work independently while teaching them the skills of independent study. Students choose their own books, did their own research, planned presentations, ran their own group sessions, evaluated some of each others' assignments, and wrote a final evaluation of their activities in the group. As teachers, we helped any group session that needed our guidance or evaluation. We also helped students review any of the skills necessary for completion of assignments. Cindy and Barbara also held book conferences with our

students on the novels they read.

Since students were responsible for much of their own learning, they gained a greater sense of importance; and since the success or failure of the day's activities depended almost entirely on them, they felt they had better be prepared. We found our students enthusiastic and interested in their work. Many of the group sessions ran so smoothly that we were able to take part in the activities and discussions as one of the students.

OBJECTIVE 6: THE STUDENT WILL DEVELOP TOOLS TO DEAL WITH THE WORLD MORE EFFECTIVELY

All the understanding of people and life's complexities will count for little if students do not have the tools to deal with life creatively and effectively. Probably the most important tools that English teachers can give their students is a good knowledge of the basic skills. Designs for English reinforces the use of the basic skills because each lesson is designed so that students will practice at least one skill in the areas of reading, writing, communication, or group interaction while he is working on that lesson. Our units on Communication and Popular Music illustrate well how the program motivates students to practice the basic skills. In our Communication unit, students studied semantics and learned the speaking and listening skills taught in the traditional communications class--but with a new twist. Students observed these communication skills in action in their everyday lives and recorded their observations in journals. By the end of the unit, our students had not only practiced the art

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of good speaking and listening, but they knew how and when to apply these skills to their lives.

In some courses, students balk at doing library research. They can't seem to understand the reasons for compiling information from the library and recording it on paper. When using Designs for English, some of our formerly "turned-off" students eagerly completed the research involved in the Popular Music unit. These students made some excellent Rock Music Magazines, using the biographies they had written on rock musicians. Once these same students learned that their parents had been teenagers in the 1950's, they eagerly researched for additional facts to broaden their understandings of what "life was like back then."

Communications and Popular Music are just two examples of how Designs for English reinforces the use of the basic skills. Like these units, all of our units place great emphasis on these skills; and the student activities in the units are geared to show students how to use these skills in their lives.

OBJECTIVE 7: THE STUDENT WILL SEE THE VALUE OF BECOMING A LIFETIME READER

Using individualized reading as a basis of our program was the prime means of helping our students on the path to becoming lifetime readers. By combining individualized reading with group interaction, we retained all the benefits of an individualized reading program with none of its drawbacks. Students generally chose books at their interest and maturity levels. But if they needed help finding a book, there was always a teacher there to make suggestions. Except for the fact that students were expected to complete a book every three weeks, they could read at their own pace. Students experienced a sense of pleasure from their reading, and lived vicariously with the characters in their novels. Cindy Blankenship and Barbara Stanford, who held

many book conferences with our students, were very pleased by the new enthusiam the students had for their reading when taking Designs for English.

Many agree that individualized reading by itself promotes the lifetime reading habit, but the combination of group interaction with individualized reading does even more; it motivates students to relate their reading assignments to their life experiences.

In Designs for English, student assignments on the reading materials ranged from writing essays summaries, and book reviews to taking part in role playing and dramatic readings. All assignments that related to the books were shared and discussed with the group members.

In our unit on Futures, our students did not merely read and analyse a science fiction novel; rather, they made predictions for the future based on their studies for the unit; then they evaluated these predictions along with those of science fiction writers. Some of our students who previously did not consider science fiction a serious literary form began to see the validity of the statements that the authors made. They also began to look at their own world with more understanding of the way that the ideas of today can become the tyrannies of the future.

Our students who studied the Values unit also learned to relate the ideas they found in their reading to themselves. These students discussed the motivations of their characters in terms of their own lives. They discussed the sacrifices that the characters made in their books; and they tried to discover what values the characters might have had to have to make these sacrifices. The students were amazed at the number of different factors that could affect values.

As our semester progressed and students became more deeply involved in Designs for English, they began to apply their reading to their lives more and more. As they did so, they gained more out of their reading and added new dimensions to their lives.

When Barbara Stanford, Cindy Blankenship, and I developed Designs for English, using individualized reading and group interaction as a basis, we wanted more than just another course where students would learn the content or read the books, but promptly forget everything they had learned after the final bell had rung and school was out for the rest of their lives. We wanted to devise a course where students gained knowledge, skills, values, and appreciations that would make their lives outside of the classroom more meaningful, enjoyable, and understandable. The course we developed accomplished these goals.

In the summer of 1977, Designs for English was published by Learning Ventures, a Multi-media Division of Bantam Books. We hope that the units we planned might bring others as much success and enjoyment as they did to us.